

## Become a mentor and make a difference

By **BRUCE W. STEBBINS**

**J**anuary is National Mentoring Month. Four years ago, this month meant very little to me. However, I was asked by a friend in December 2005 to be a mentor to an eighth-grade student at Chestnut Middle School in Springfield.

I agreed, although I was nervous about the experience. I wondered, how would I connect with this young man? What

### VIEWPOINT

would I say; what should I say? I was also serving as a city councilor in Springfield, I was managing a full-time job, and my wife and I had a new baby. How would I make the time?

We began by playing chess, one hour a week during the school day. Soon we were calculating players' statistics while reading Sports Illustrated together. Before I realized it, we were connecting.

Visiting my mentee was something I looked forward to each week. I found that the time commitment was easier to meet than I had anticipated. I also found myself feeling a deeper connection to my community than I had ever before experienced.

As a city councilor I was deeply familiar with the city's issues, but this relationship provided a wholly different view of the city than I had before – a view through the eyes of one of our young residents who personally experienced the city's challenges on a daily basis.

Right now there are more than 3,000 children in Massachusetts on waiting lists for mentors, and there are 15 quality mentoring programs in Western Massachusetts, working to find adults to match with these children. These programs also provide the training and support as a friendship is built.

We've all had mentors. We know what it means to have someone of-

fer guidance, support and friendship. Unfortunately, there are too many kids who don't know what it means to have a mentor.

Committing to just four hours a month can change this for one child.

Powerful stories of friendship, broadening horizons, and transformative change are happening here in Springfield and all over Western Massachusetts.

Adults who mentor say it's one of the most rewarding experiences of their lives. Kids who are mentored will tell you that the consistent friendship of a caring adult brought them out of isolation and opened the world to them.

Mentoring is proven in its potential to change the lives of young people and strengthen our communities.

The value of service has been recognized from the White House, where President Barack H. Obama issued a national call to service – United We Serve – to the board rooms and workplaces of corporations and organizations across the country.

As National Mentoring Month comes to a close, I encourage you to think about someone who has had an impact on your life. Think about the power of presence, friendship, and consistency and offer that to a child who is waiting. Become a mentor.

For more information on mentoring programs in Western Massachusetts visit [www.massmentors.org](http://www.massmentors.org).

*Bruce W. Stebbins, a former Springfield city councilor, is senior regional manager with the National Association of Manufacturers. His wife Katie L. Stebbins is also a mentor and serves as director of the Western Massachusetts office of the MassMentoring Partnership, located at Western New England College. For more information on becoming a mentor, call (413) 796-2330.*



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